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SUBJECT: Embassy Tirana Weekly Report

Obama Mania Hits Tirana

1. (U) An unusually high number of eyes were fixated on TV screens on Tuesday across Albania, expressing both emotion and anticipation as citizens from all walks of life tuned in to watch the inauguration of President Obama. Local stations all aired the ceremony live, and local bars and clubs were all showing it on their TV screens. While the general mood was a sense of excitement for the new administration, there was also a lot of focus on the outgoing President Bush. Commentators were split between those appreciative of Bush's support of Kosova's independence and Albania's NATO membership, and those who also spoke of the more controversial policies of the Bush administration. All were happy to witness a new face and vitality at the helm of America's government. Under an article headlined "Obama Hope in Tirana", a local reporter commented on a photo competition "the Day of Change 1/20" organized by a Japanese magazine and the participation of a Tirana local photographer. "I will take pictures of the Tirana Zoo", the photographer said. "No one needs greater change in Tirana than these poor animals living in this decrepit Zoo." A strange pick perhaps, but an innovative take nevertheless on the inclusive political agenda introduced.

2. (U) President Obama's election has generated a frenzy of political reactions in Tirana's political scene as well. With an opposition headed by Edi Rama closely associated with President Obama's philosophy of change, the government has found it difficult to align itself with the new administration. Both Berisha's recent controversial actions taken in open opposition to the U.S. position and also his close association with the outgoing administration have made it hard for him to succeed in this attempt. The flop of the effort has not come for lack of trying, however. Speaker Topalli rushed to Washington in an unannounced trip to attend the inauguration ceremony, and PM Berisha held a press conference congratulating the new President. The ruling party has since November slowly rearranged its position and embraced a number of Obama campaign elements. "A friend is leaving the White House today and a new one is coming. We express our determination for comprehensive and excellent cooperation with the new administration in defense of the common values which we share," Berisha said on Tuesday. Nice words, if only they were sincere and matched with action.

Gender Equality - Still Good

3. (U) The fact that in Albania's parliamentary republic, the Speaker of Parliament, Ms. Jozefina Topalli, is a woman, is definitely and without any doubt a good thing - in terms of gender equality, at least. In terms of efficiency and performance, however, most believe that Topalli has brought excessive aggressiveness to the position. Memorable is her appeal to parliament security guards to "grab him (an opposition MP) by his rags and throw him out," after her party boss, PM Berisha, had just threatened to kill the same opposition MP, shouting "I will kill you!" during an open session of parliament and live on TV.

4. (U) Gender equality in Albania saw another big boost in December 007, when President selected Ms. Rama, a young woman working in a southern district, to be the country's new Prosecutor General. The young PG came across initially as uncomfortable with the attention she attracted, but began to show persistence at taking on high profile investigations involving senior GOA officials and their alleged corruption. With time, she has shown greater confidence at public events. Again, in terms of gender equality, her selection is absolutely and without any doubt a good thing. Ms. Rama appears in the January edition of a magazine called "Jeta" (Life), a reputable publication. The 9-page story (including the cover) features 7 photos of Ms. Rama. The photos, unfortunately

typical of Albanian media, show Ms. Rama in jeans in one photo, in a miniskirt in another, in a serious business suit showing her thighs in another, and in corduroy a-bit-too-tight pants in another, or in red-and-black shiny shoes in the last one. While the photos themselves are not particularly offensive, they come across to many as diminishing the serious role and responsibilities she carries as Prosecutor General. Gender equality is unquestionably good, but there is still a long way to go.

The end of the Albanian transition? Not really!

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15. (U) The completion of the current agreement with the IMF marks an important moment in the economic development of Albania. It should be a sign of maturity for Albania, including state political and economic institutions. It also allows the country to enter into a new phase of relations with the IMF, as Albania theoretically joins the pool of developed economies. However, not everybody is singing hymns to this event. The opposition and economic experts consider the IMF departure to be premature, and believe that the country is not ready yet to act independently. It might even reverse some of the achievements that Albania has accomplished over the last years.

16. (U) Leaving aside the bickering over the economic growth rate between the GOA, opposition and IMF - bickering which is politically motivated and should be seen as part of the upcoming parliamentary electoral campaign - the departure of the IMF could have serious consequences for Albania. The big issue remains whether Albanian institutions have matured enough and Albania politicians have become responsible enough to walk alone without tight supervision. The general perception is we are not there yet. Albania is entering an electoral year, while the global financial crisis shows no signs of abating. How well the Albanian economy will weather the crisis is a real test for the Berisha government. But a real economy needs real actions, and not just wishful thinking and hope for the best.

Quote of the Week:

"From beyond the ocean yesterday, a new day has dawned for America - one that will lighten the way for the free world and our little Albania as well, at a time when like never before people need a new politics." - Edi Rama, Chairman of the Opposition Socialist Party, addressing the country on the wake of President Obama's inauguration.

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